

# DAYS GONE BY

## History of Palm Bay

Monthly Article

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### EARLY SETTLERS - JOHN AND ROSALIE MICHELS

By 1913, harsh Minnesota winters had caused such severe respiratory problems for farmer John Michels, his doctor's prescription was simple: Go South or 'go west'.

Joining 104 other German or Bohemian farm families migrating to Tillman from the Midwest or great plains between 1910 and 1914, the John and Rosalie Michels, of Germany, and most of their 14 children came to Tillman in 1913 from Sandstone, Minnesota.



Rosalie & John Michels in old tintype

The family farmed the corner of what is now Hardin Lane and Knecht Road. John grubbed the land and dynamited the stumps of palmettos on approximately 40 acres. They raised eggplant, peppers, potatoes and watermelons, and established a citrus grove. He took his produce on a horse-drawn wagon to the

railroad depot for shipment to northern markets. Sometimes, he loaded his watermelons on the wagon and sold them door-to-door.

The land the Michels bought cost them about \$40 per acre. They resided on this homestead for more than 40 years. In addition to the produce, they raised gladioluses during one period of time and had chickens, cows, and hogs.

Toting cane syrup pails filled with sandwiches for lunch, young daughter Philomene Michels walked five mile round trips over sandy Knecht and Palm Bay roads to the town's wooden two room elementary school house on Miller Street "unless somebody came by with a buggy to pick us up." The school had grades one through eight and a Miss Morgan was one of the teachers.

Before 1920, local ninth graders and up, at first were taken to a Melbourne school in a covered wagon drawn by a mule team.

But by the fall Philomene reached the fourth grade--when Tillman was temporarily without a local elementary teacher--and with other youngsters was shuttled to Melbourne in a spoke-wheeled black Model T Ford Bus. True, the tin Lizzie lacked a speedometer and had to be hand-cranked, but it did have flapping curtains over the glass windows to keep out dust and rain.

Pious mother Rosalie, praying her seven daughters would become nuns, piled her large brood into a big lumber wagon for Sunday morning treks to St. Joseph's Catholic Church on Miller Street. Eventually, three of the girls became teaching nuns and a fourth became a missionary sister working among Indians and Mexican-Americans of the southwest.

As a child Philomene passed time with such simple recreations as watching the family's muscle-powered potato sorter separate grades for a barrel-loaded wagon, ready to roll to the downtown East Coast Railroad loading platform on Main Street.

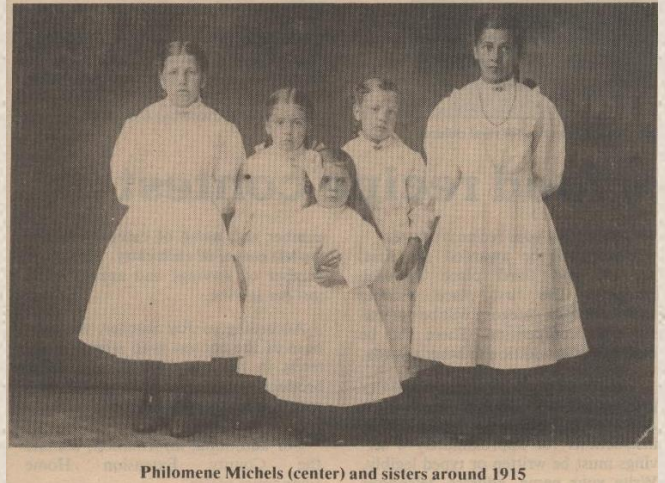
"What I remember (of Tillman) is an awful lot of white sand--and wooden houses," said Philomene Michels Weber.

By the late 1920's as a teenager, she and other young German or Bohemian-American dancers mingled the Charleston with waltzes at a house-sized recreation hall in a tourist cottage camp on U.S. Highway No. 1 at Palm Bay Road.

"Sometimes if there weren't enough boys or they were too shy, the girls would have to dance together" while violinists and accordionists played away, said Philomene.

Philomene Michels met her future husband, Frank Weber, at St. Joseph Catholic church. They both sang in the choir. By age 30, Philomene and her fiancé Frank Weber, a Malabar farmer, were enjoying such outings as a ride in his tin Lizzie coupe over the wooden bridge linking Melbourne and Indialantic, for a suntan on the beach. They were married in 1940 and went to live in the old Weber House.

Philomene, at age 90, died in April 2000.



Philomene Michels (center) and sisters around 1915

*(to be continued next month ...)*